



## Never Enough Time

We've all thought it at some point: there just aren't enough hours in the day. But enough for what? And more to the point, compared to what? There's never been more than 24 hours in any day; we're not dealing with a relative scarcity of time. In fact, thanks to the convenience afforded by so much of our technology we probably have *more* time to do fewer necessary tasks.

If you still feel strapped for time check out [Creative Block #3](#) by Mark McGuinness at the Lateral Action blog. It's humbling how some people have accomplished so much with a lot less time on their hands than many of us enjoy. Mark offers a bunch of tips to maximize your time and put your creativity to work in those spare moments.

Most of all we need to cultivate a sense of abundance around the time we have.

[Leave a Comment](#)

January 22, 2010

## Taking Control of Your Schedule

A [post on Signal vs. Noise](#) reminded me of an article that I read a little while ago on [fixed schedule productivity](#). The article is fairly long but the point of it is very simple: decide when and how much you want to work and build your schedule around that.

Sounds almost too easy, but I imagine it's also fairly rare that people are able to work on their own schedule. First, many of us work for somebody else who sets our schedule (or some of it) for us. Second, we generally allow external forces to control what we do during the work day. I think both of these obstacles can be overcome, at least to some degree.

Even if you work for an employer, you probably have more control of your time than you might think. Do you really need to attend every meeting that you're invited to? Usually it's possible to convince the caller of a meeting that your attendance isn't necessary if that's the truth. Also it's generally possible to decide what kinds of work you want to do at different times of the day. Feel better getting email over with first thing? You can probably get away with checking in the morning and not touching email again until a review closer to the end of the day. Like to do creative work in a big chunk of time? Put it in your schedule so you won't be available for meetings and such during that time.

As for letting external forces control our time: this really has to do with our perception of time rather than any reality. Think about the way you approach

## Info

[About this Blog](#)

## Subscribe



[Subscribe by RSS](#)

## Archives

[January 2010](#)

[December 2009](#)

[November 2009](#)

[September 2009](#)

[August 2009](#)

[May 2009](#)

[April 2009](#)

[March 2009](#)

[February 2009](#)

[January 2009](#)

[December 2008](#)

## Recommended

[43 Folders](#)

[Lateral Action](#)

[LifeClever](#)

[Tools for Thought](#)

[Zen Habits](#)

## Search

Search

time, whether you're generally overwhelmed or feel in control, have too much time on your hands or too little. I would guess that this perception of time stays with you whether you're at work, or at home or even on vacation.

The key I think is to approach time as a background reality, a landscape within which we all live. Where we choose to go within that landscape is up to us.

[Leave a Comment](#)

January 8, 2010

## A Text Processor that Quiets the Chattering Monkey

I'm writing this on a new text processor called [Ommwriter](#), which adds another entry to the list of immersive text editors that aim to remove distractions and simply put your writing front and center. [Ommwriter](#) goes further than most into focusing on the *experience* of writing itself. Like other apps, it opens full screen but also includes background music, keystroke sounds and an adjustable writing area.

The vision behind the app is solid and the the name, Ommwriter, really nails the meditative effect that's created by the experience of writing with it. Just writing these couple of paragraphs has created a tranquil feeling, and the resulting text does feel like it's being generated more organically than usual.

I don't expect the experience of using [Ommwriter](#) will be for everybody, but for those seeking some zen with their writing it works remarkably well, probably because it doesn't try to do too much outside the extraordinary atmospherics it creates. I'll be coming back to this app for certain to see if it handles all writted content as well as it does short blog posts like this.

Ommwriter is in beta for Macs only. Invitations to the beta are open and can be easily obtained at the [Ommwriter website](#).

[Comments \(1\)](#)

December 4, 2009

## Practice, Repetition and Memory

Jack Cheng nails it in his post [Thirty Minutes a Day](#). I've talked a lot about the benefits of incremental activity, repetition, habit, etc. but Cheng explains beautifully why all of this works, with reference to the work of famed language educator, Paul Pimsleur. Pimsleurs method of Graduated Interval Recall models how well-timed repetitions of information aid memory.

Simply put, we forget stuff unless we repeat it and the more we repeat it sooner the less we have to repeat it later. This is why I have to practice a new technique on the guitar (or lately the ukelele) daily for a while or I lose it, but I can easily play something familiar that I haven't done in months. I suspect the frequency of repetition vs. memorability is related to the amount of time it takes

to form a habit.

Another implication of this principle is that it should be possible to stagger learning experiences. In other words, it would be best to start learning only one new thing at a time, but since the repetition of lessons gets more spread out over time it wouldn't be long before there was plenty of time to pick up a new skill or practice.

Jack Cheng explains all of this much more eloquently than I have, so be sure to check out [his article](#). Then read it again in a week, and again a month from then, and again six months later...

## [Comments \(1\)](#)

November 23, 2009

## Makers and Managers

You may have come across it before, but I have to mention a great article by Paul Graham: [Maker's Schedule, Manager's Schedule](#). In this article Graham points out what I've long suspected: those who make things (designers, developers, etc.) live on very different time than the managers with whom they interact on a regular basis. In short the makers need large chunks of uninterrupted time in which to work, and the managers need to hop from call to call, meeting to meeting, rarely focusing on one thing for very long.

Having been both a maker and a manager I can attest to the truth of this hypothesis and the necessity of respecting these schedules. Otherwise you end up with people being unproductive, frustrated and not able to perform to their potential.

## [Leave a Comment](#)

September 11, 2009

## Staying Focused in a Scattered World

My [last post](#) discussed the evils of multi-tasking; today I came across an article on the related problem of context switching. Many of us need to accomplish a wide variety of tasks in our work. Managing people, handling clients or customers, producing deliverables, conducting research – sometimes these are all part of the job. The problem is that the more different kinds of things we have to do, the more difficult it becomes to do each one.

I've been in a position lately where my work involves interaction design, analysis, web development and product development across a few different project areas and business units. It's a real challenge to maintain an optimal level of performance in all these areas. I came across a possible solution in an article titled: [Reclaim Focus, One Day at a Time](#). This article suggests chunking work by type and dedicating each day to each chunk. It's an interesting idea. I'll certainly be adding the source of the article, [99%](#) to my reading list.

September 10, 2009

## Multi-Tasking and its Discontents

Research has shown that multi-taskers are [more easily distracted](#), [have trouble learning](#), and are [less productive](#). There's even a new book on the subject whose title makes the thesis pretty clear: [The Myth of Multitasking: How "Doing It All" Gets Nothing Done](#).

Still, there are many who pride themselves on their ability to multitask and it seems to become more difficult to simply do one thing at a time. Lately I've been struggling to really pay attention to each task at hand. This is really really hard.

So let me define the problem by listing different kinds of multitasking behavior and their possible roots and solutions:

### Self-distraction

There's always the opportunity to find something else to pay attention to. Reading email, checking Facebook or Twitter, doing some "research" on the web. These are all ways of distracting oneself. This is also one of the easiest kinds of multi-tasking to stop, since it's so clearly unnecessary.

### Performing minor tasks while waiting for something else to happen.

Cause: Impatience.

Could be checking email, reading feeds, general web surfing while waiting for an application to load, while on hold on phone, etc. This kind of behavior seems harmless enough since it's just filling time that would otherwise be wasted. Still, it requires shifting of focus and therefore has some cognitive cost. I'm trying to simply wait in these situations and it feels pretty good just doing nothing, staying focused on the task at hand even if I'm not *doing* anything about it in the moment.

### Trying to listen and do something else at the same time.

Cause: Boredom

This is a major reason why meetings take more time and accomplish less than they should. Everybody is sitting at the meeting while working on their laptop or participating on the phone while doing who knows what. I wonder whether this would happen if everybody were truly interested in what was being said. Here's an idea: if somebody shows up to a meeting and spends the whole time on their laptop then they probably didn't need to be invited to the meeting in the first place.

### Interruptions

Cause: Other people

You're working on something on your computer and then the phone rings, you pick it up talk for a minute, get back to work, then somebody taps you on the shoulder to ask you a question, which you answer then back to work, then you get an IM, etc. etc. etc. This kind of multitasking is especially difficult to curb since doing so requires changing other people's expectations of your availability.

I've gone some way here in identifying the problem. Now the next step is to come up with some workable solutions.

## [Comments \(1\)](#)

September 6, 2009

## Rescue Time: Process vs. Product

A while ago I signed up to try [Rescue Time](#), a service that monitors how you are spending time on your computer and then crunches that data to show you how productive you are being. Recently the service has undergone some major changes, all of which make it easier to use, more intuitive and more useful. Nonetheless, I don't use it much and may be putting it aside entirely soon.

The problem is that Rescue Time addresses a problem I'm not particularly interested in solving. I don't really care what applications I'm running, what websites I'm visiting, etc. Am I wasting time reading newsfeeds or checking Twitter when I could be working? Yes. But I already know this and when I need to put those activities aside I'm usually able to do so.

The really tough distractions often occur offline (interruptions from the phone or in person taps on the shoulder) or online through apps that are otherwise productive (email, IM). Sometimes a 30 minute IM session is productive, sometimes not. And Rescue Time doesn't know the difference.

The biggest problem is that time does not equal productivity, because productivity is not measured by the time you put into a process but what comes out of it. Sometimes a focused burst of activity can be more productive than hours of unfocused labor. What I want is an application that measures the *product* of my time rather than the *process* I'm engaged in. Did I produce more in the morning or the afternoon? Should I be coding at the beginning of the day and concentrating on design later on? When am I going to be most effective in communicating ideas to other people? Unfortunately I don't know of any software that can answer these questions.

For many people, Rescue Time may be just the ticket to getting more out of each day. For me it's mostly an additional distraction.

**Update:** ResueTime's own Tony Wright has addressed a lot of my problems in [his comment](#) on this post (thanks Tony!). He points out some features I wasn't aware of and makes the excellent point that RescueTime is great when measuring people's time (esp. in terms of team management) is the goal. There's a real fine line between a tool that is indispensable and one that just doesn't produce enough return to justify the investment required for setup and maintenance. For me RescueTime falls on the wrong side of that line but I can see how it might be invaluable for folks with different requirements.

## [Comments \(1\)](#)

August 17, 2009

# Jason Fried On Momentum, Productivity and Business Success

37 Signals recently added a page for [talks given by their staff](#) where I came across a presentation that Jason Fried gave at the [Business of Software 2008](#). Fried is never afraid to speak his mind and be controversial and there's much here I would disagree with. Just because what he does works for 37 Signals doesn't mean it works for everybody, but there were some ideas that really grabbed me.

## Interruption is the Enemy of Productivity

Fried talks about how creative people need large blocks of time in which to work and that interruptions cut into this time. 37 Signals has dealt with this problem by maintaining an office that nobody works at; everybody works remotely, meeting only occasionally as a group in their office space. This eliminates some common forms of interruption like the **tap on the shoulder** or the **address from across the room**.

## The Four Day Week

All 37 Signals employees work a Monday through Thursday with Friday off. Fried says that productivity has increased since they cut Fridays, his explanation being that people have had to cut out the non-essential work and focus on what's important.

There are certainly many jobs that can expand to fill the time allotted to them and distractions can eat up a lot of time. Still, I'm not so sure that cutting out a day of work would automatically eliminate this kind of waste. 37 Signals clearly is committed to creating the most effective work environment, and it's this kind of support that seems most crucial.

## Momentum

This was the overall theme of the talk: how building momentum creates good work and great companies. It seems that there are a few components to this, but a big part of it is creating easy opportunities for success. Smaller projects, attention to detail and constant iteration: these tactics create successes that can be repeated such that people are always motivated to do better work.

This talk is well worth viewing. Check it out below.

[Leave a Comment](#)

August 14, 2009

## Think

I'm not going to be one of those bloggers who uses a whole post to apologize for not having posted in so long, so let's jump right into a look at [Think](#) a mac application from Freeverse.



Think does one simple thing: it hides all applications except the one you're working in. There's a whole lot more to it and more sophisticated features but I'm not going to talk about that. Instead I'd like to address how surprisingly useful this application is.

### **It's A Bug, Not a Feature**

I remember when I could *only* do one thing at a time on my computer. The last time was probably when I had a Mac Plus that ran applications off a floppy disk. If you wanted to run another app you had to quit whatever you were doing, eject one disk and insert another. Over time computers added more and more memory and designers came up with ways to switch between applications running at the same time. Now I regularly run around a dozen apps on my computer simultaneously, often switching between them constantly. Rather than making me more efficient this constant switching of

tasks and contexts makes me scattered, tired and unhappy.

### One Thing At a Time

Of course, there's no putting the genie back in the bottle. I'm not going to go back to only running one application at a time. The time spent quitting and starting up apps would seem immense, even if it made me more efficient overall. I just don't have the discipline to take that kind of step. Likewise, I don't have the self control to just work on one thing at a time when all those other apps are clamoring for my attention in the Dock and around my Desktop. So what's a guy to do?

### Help Is On The Way

Think has effectively solved the problem of app overload. Seeing just one application at a time (with the rest of the screen blacked out) has an enormously calming effect on me, making focusing on the task at hand much easier. There's still times when I flit between apps, although I'm trying to keep that to a minimum. But when Think is doing its job I can turn off all the noise of multiple applications, desktop background, etc., and just. do. one. thing.

If this appeals to you, check out [Think](#). Oh, and it's free.

### [Comments \(1\)](#)

August 13, 2009

[« Older Posts](#)